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RIGHTS OF PERSONS BELONGING TO NATIONAL OR ETHNIC, RELIGIOUS AND LINGUISTIC MINORITIES

Written statement submitted by the Baha'i International Community, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1296 (XLIV).

[13 February 1998]

Protection of minorities

1. All people are entitled to the same universal human rights. All qualify for the same standard of justice. Thus it is self-evident that members of minorities should have rights equal to those of all other persons. Therefore, majorities have a special responsibility, motivated by a sense of justice, for bringing about appropriate social and political adjustments to enable minorities to exercise, to the fullest extent possible, the rights they have in common with everyone. By the same token, minorities have a moral responsibility to respond honourably to such genuine endeavour by majorities. All this implies dealing with minority issues within the context of a shared understanding that the advantage of the part is best served by ensuring the advantage of the whole and that the whole cannot flourish when certain parts are oppressed or deprived.

2. As an integral part of every society, minorities constitute an indispensable aspect of social diversity in all countries. Such diversity is to be welcomed as a natural phenomenon much the same as the variegated flowers of a garden.

3. Indeed, in every society many forms of diversity are embraced. It is useful, therefore, to distinguish between differences that make one minority needful of particular attention to ensure the actualization of their human rights and differences that engender no particular concern. Every majority incorporates within itself a reasonably congenial collection of minorities, and there are invariably minorities within minorities. It would be impossible, then, to set boundaries that would guarantee exclusion of all minorities. Equally impossible, it seems to us, is the creation of a sufficiently useful definition of minority to embrace the prevailing realities. Moreover, at this time human beings are so inclined to promote discrimination against their fellows, that there is a risk that undue effort at defining minorities could unwittingly provide new pretexts for discrimination.

4. A more productive course of action might be to identify and noise abroad the conditions being suffered by underprivileged minorities and to generate action both to equip these minorities to claim their just rights and to urge governments to enact the necessary legislation to redress legitimate minority grievances. Beyond such action there remains the necessity to effect a change in the attitude of majorities towards oppressed minorities and to lift from minorities any sense of helplessness induced by prolonged oppression.

5. The Baha'i International Community has observed with satisfaction the proceedings of the first three sessions of the Sub-Commission's Working Group on Minorities. The establishment of such a working group and the emphasis given to the promotion and protection of the rights of persons belonging to minorities by the Sub-Commission and the Commission itself are to be commended.

6. We believe, however, that the challenge of securing justice for all citizens is not entirely within the ability of governments to meet, as it calls for the exercise of spiritual and moral influences. Indeed, the legal rationality of human rights, though essential, is not a sufficient basis for

the resolution of minority problems, which for the most part originated in the malfunctioning of the human spirit. For a lasting resolution to be achieved, it must be recognized that collateral with the application of the legal provisions for these rights is adherence to the principles of the human spirit. With the latter, the approach, the very language, is different. The operation of these principles imbues both majorities and minorities with a consciousness of their reciprocal moral responsibilities as fellow human beings - a consciousness which vitalizes such civilizing virtues as forbearance, mercy, compassion and loving kindness towards all people; a consciousness which emboldens the voice of conscience, and which opens portals to a realm of experience which employs the language of the heart where the language of civil law exerts no influence.

7. It is in this latter context that the Baha'i International Community feels an acute need and particular urgency. For if the immense human rights efforts being made by the United Nations and governments is to bear fruit, the combined force of political and legal, spiritual and moral influences must be employed in an unrelenting pursuit of solutions to the problems that oppress minorities. For its part the Baha'i International Community is attempting to address these challenges within its membership throughout the world, and in this regard it considers itself a workshop in which its members are learning to apply the principles of world order brought by Baha'Ullah more than a century ago. Spread throughout the earth, the Baha'i community has integrated representatives of all racial and national backgrounds and from a wide range of religious experiences into a community united in action to attain realization of the oneness of humankind.

8. The oneness of humankind is a reality that past ages were ill equipped to certify. Now it is increasingly recognized that what hurts one portion of the human race, hurts all of it; what benefits one, benefits all. At this time in history when scientific discoveries have compelled a global awareness of the commonality of the heritage and endowments of all people, it is possible to resolve the issues of deprivation that are consequences of disunity. The attention being given by organs of the United Nations to these long-neglected issues signifies a unique stage in the evolution of social life on the planet. We, therefore, urge the Commission on Human Rights to adopt the draft decision recommended by the Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities (resolution 1997/23) and allow the Working Group on Minorities to meet annually.